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# THE ART MUSEUM AND THE PUBLIC

MRS. SCHUYLER VAN RENSSELAER

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THE old problem with which we have always thought ourselves seriously concerned—education—is broadening and deepening under our eyes, opened to many truths and errors during the last three years; and for every thinking person, I am sure, it now includes a great need to cultivate the idealistic side of human nature. To do this, in this way to combat the ambitious materialism, the self-seeking worship of “practical efficiency” which is so largely to blame for the agony of Europe and which threatens the happiness of America also, is a many-sided task. Here I can speak only, and only in outline, of some of the questions and some of the facts that must be borne in mind when we consider our art museums as agents for opening the minds of our people to the influence of beauty.

The first to consider is the fact that sensitiveness to the beauty that resides in works of art is not synonymous with knowledge in regard to them. True appreciation of the beauty that appeals at once to eye and mind, to sense and soul, must be based upon something more than historical and critical knowledge, even of the widest and wisest kind. But too commonly in the past we have thought that its foundations could be set upon teachings of a far inferior sort—upon a mixture of scrappy historical and biographical information, studio commonplaces and paradoxes, vague æsthetic theories, and a superficial acquaintance, usually at second or third hand, with what is “considered the best” in the art of the present and the past. Such “knowledge of art” as this cannot be of much use; certainly of none in developing a sensitiveness to the emotional, inspirational influence of beauty.

What, then, can be done in the way of teaching true appreciation? Some will answer, Nothing. A person may be

taught to paint, they say—taught up to a certain point and if he has certain gifts; but only from art itself can he learn appreciation. And this last is true. It is true that no one can learn appreciation from the words or the books of others. Everyone must teach himself. His own eye must be his preceptor. He must look at the actual things of beauty, and look, and look again until they become their own interpreters, speaking their own messages of spiritual as well as technical import. Without this kind of self-education all other efforts are in vain.

But in this essential work of self-instruction, books and teachers can guide and help. A certain amount of historical and technical knowledge is necessary, indeed, for the right and full understanding of what the eye shall eventually teach itself to see and to love. Only with this kind of aid can we relate the works that we are looking at to the men who produced them, and contrast them with other developments similarly understood; and only by this process can we learn the reasons for the differences between the various forms and phases of plastic art so that, by clearly seeing them, we may deeply feel the intrinsic individual qualities of each, never duplicated in other places or other times. Moreover, no man's eye can be as sensitive as it might become, his judgments as trustworthy, even his emotions as susceptible, if they are not stimulated and clarified by a knowledge of what other men have seen and thought and felt.

None the less the main preceptor must always be one's own eye, and the way to cultivate its powers must always be to use them. This means that, as conditions are in our country today, almost all valid training in the appreciation of art must be gained in the public museum or gallery. And it follows that in all possible ways the museum, the gallery, should itself facilitate, stimulate, and guide the self-education of the people.

Not by all those who manage our museums or are personally concerned with their development is this implication accepted. In fact, it is fuel just now for fires of discussion. Should an art museum, it is asked, exist primarily for the benefit of the general public or, as some one once said of a university, "for the cherishing of gifted persons"? The right answer would seem to be that a museum should exist for the gifted person and also for the public at large, just as a public library must serve all classes of men and every grade

of mind. Some will insist that the general public cannot profit by an art museum as even the unintellectual may by a library, and cannot, in any degree worth recognizing and working for, be led so to profit. Nevertheless the conviction spreads that the people in general must be considered, and that, if the effort be well made it will prove well worth the making. There could hardly be a different decision in democratic communities. "All men are equal," someone has said, in having "an equal right to spiritual activities," and society needs that the opportunity for such activities should to all men be given.

But granted that the effort be worth making, how shall we make it? Here controversies begin again. For example, if a museum is to serve for the cultivation of the public taste, is it well to confine its exhibits to the products of the "fine arts" strictly so-called? Or may it better include in addition artistic things of which the value is partly industrial, historical, or ethnographical? Again, whatever its scope, should it harbor only things of the very best according to high critical standards? Or should it be more leniently inclusive, accepting the testimony of almost all lovers of art that they began by liking things that were not the very best and gradually, naturally developed a truer taste?

It is well that questions like these should be warmly debated; for, whatever our museums may decide to be and to do, it is well that they should abandon their early indefiniteness of aim, their contentment with a casual, unorganized, undirected manner of growth. Naturally, no one programme could be thought of as valid for them all. But each should have a definite field, and the more definite it is the easier of course will be the task of selecting among proffered gifts, and the more likely are gifts to be of desirable kinds.

We have outlived the needy, tentative, timid period when a museum, afraid to make an enemy or to discourage a possible friend, docilely accepted almost all that was offered it—superfluous things, inappropriate things, inferior things, sometimes things that ought to have gone instead to the boarding-house parlor or the junk-heap. Nowadays a museum is rarely afraid to reject what it does not want, and a donor is often modest enough to offer, while alive or after death, merely such a selection from his actual or supposititious treasures as the museum itself may see fit to make. It would be of benefit, though, if intending donors would more

often find out in advance how the institution they wish to aid may best be aided; and also if they would remember that one very fine object is more to be desired than several of less distinction.

The larger our museums become the oftener it is asked whether, because of the fatigue of body and confusion of mind which result from seeing too many things at once, a number of smaller buildings in various parts of a city would not be better than a single one of great size housing a great variety of collections. It ought to be obvious that any one needs only a little self-control to divide for his own use the largest museum into as many of as small a size as he may prefer to visit. Perhaps it is not as easy for everyone to understand how greatly the cost of establishing and building a museum, and especially the heavy cost of running it, would be increased by a policy of dispersion. But the chief argument for large museums is that the more varied in kind are the collections under a single roof, the better are the opportunities for study, whether of a very serious kind or not.

From this point of view even a special collection as well-rounded within its own limits as Mr. Altman's gains in value by coming into a great museum. In another way, of course, it loses. No one who ever saw Mr. Altman's beautiful things in his own galleries would deny that such a place puts a visitor into a peculiarly sensitive frame of mind, and gives its contents a peculiar potency and charm. Such an atmosphere of peaceful seclusion, such a concentration of interest and intensity of appeal cannot be achieved in a great and diversified museum. The small and specialized collection has its own part to play in American communities. We want as many as we can get, but above all we need in every great city a great museum formed by collective enterprise to meet general public needs and desires; a place where large numbers of people may be welcomed; a place where the unlearned may be tempted to learn something, and meanwhile may be won to some degree of enjoyment, by rich and varied displays of beauty; a place where the student may survey wide fields of art, easily and at once make close or broad comparisons, examine into æsthetic affinities and contrasts, and, moreover, find the aid of a library and a photographic collection.

Difficult indeed in a large museum is the task of arrangement, for arrangement means classification, and classifica-

tion is a problem which seldom admits of perfect solutions—only of more or less satisfactory approximations. Because of the gradual passing of one historical period into another and the interlocking of the activities of different peoples, even the broad assorting of objects of art according to their origins in time and place is not always plain sailing. Then, when all the material for a department has been brought together, shall it be grouped according to kinds or chronologically? Shall all the sculptures of classic Greece, for example, be kept together, all the vases, all the bronzes? Or shall all the things of the archaic periods of Grecian art be associated and, progressively, all those of each later period? The first is the old traditional plan, still adhered to in many departments of American museums, and beloved of the special student of some one form of art. The other is more modern; for the average visitor its results are more instructive, and are much more interesting and attractive, as, to give an instance, the popularity of the Egyptian rooms in the Metropolitan Museum clearly shows; and it is certain more and more to prevail or to be combined with the older method of grouping.

Again: Whichever method of arrangement is chosen, should it be guided by a policy of generous inclusiveness or of fastidious selection? If the department is rich in material, should all of this be shown in the main galleries or only the finest objects, while the others are kept in reserve where the seriously interested may find them by seeking or be shown them for the asking? This may seem merely a question of degree, but in reality it marks two quite different theories as to how the eye and the mind of the visitor may best be served and as to what kind of visitor is best worth serving. If the public could express its opinion I am sure that it would favor the plentiful display, the opportunity to see, without special seeking, as much as is available of each form and phase of art. We know that experts can decide, much better than we could ourselves, what things are worthy of a place in a museum; but we are not so willing to have them say which among these good things are the best for us to look at. We want, and if we are to enlarge our powers of appreciation we need, to see as much as can be shown us. We want to see for ourselves why some good things are more admirable than others, and to decide which to our own eyes and our own spirit are the

most eloquent of beauty and charm. "The world"—writes Emerson, meaning that general verdict which in the long run establishes the value of human products, "selects for us the best and we select from that best, our best." Until we can do this we have no true titles of ownership in the domains of beauty.

Moreover, a number of objects of the same kind have a power to interest, to impress, that one or two such objects in isolation may not possess. To say this is, I know, to run counter to certain current ideas—to the idea, for instance, that we ought to imitate the Japanese in their love of the sparse appeal to the eye, of the isolated work of art. But we are not Japanese nor of the same mental and emotional stock. If our art and our concern for art are to express ourselves, the thing to build upon is not some alien example but our own innate inherited prepossessions. And in loving richness of display, multifariousness, the opportunity for the eye to pass from one beautiful thing to another making perpetual comparisons and appraisals, we are following instincts transmitted from all those great people of the past whose heirs and assigns we are. Look as far back among Occidental nations as we may, we find that all of them, Egyptians and Greeks and Romans, Byzantines, mediæval Frenchmen, Italians of the Renaissance, loved to bring many works of art into close association; and most plainly do we read the fact in what seemed to them their most important work—the embellishment of their public buildings, which were usually their temples of worship. Of course in these cases the association was organic while in a museum it is inorganic. But this does not matter to my argument of the moment, for we may assume that the museum arrangement is harmonious and I merely want to show that we need not feel ashamed if our taste with regard to quantity is not Japanese.

With the great resources now at their disposal our museums are working out schemes of various kinds for the definite instruction of the public—not all of them as yet but an ever-growing number of the large and the small. Study-rooms devoted to one branch of art or another, handbooks and special treatises, illustrated lectures delivered in the museum or elsewhere to children and to divers classes of adults, tours of the galleries under guidance, loan collections sent to various parts of the city—these are some of the

methods that they adopt, always with the conviction that true teaching means advising the eye how to educate itself and therefore always with the aid of the museum collections. Often they work in collaboration with the college or the school. Sometimes their aim is to inspire workers in the industrial arts, or to increase the knowledge and develop the taste of manufacturers or sales-people, or to aid the teacher of drawing or of history, and sometimes simply to cultivate the love of art and beauty. The paths thus opened are wide, and it is not easy to know just how they should be pursued with regard either to ultimate aims or to immediate methods. Little help can be got from precedents, for even in Europe, outside of Italy, the museum of art is a relatively new institution; still more modern, distinctively of our own day, is the desire to utilize it for the cultivation of the people at large; and many of our needs and difficulties are proper to our own land as well as our own time. It is our museums themselves that have started this novel work. It has already been heartily endorsed and facilitated by schools and colleges and by national, State, and municipal authorities concerned with education, but to make it really effective it must also win the support of all others who care for education and who care for art. "What is now needed is a nation-wide appreciation of the value of visual instruction as afforded by museums."\*

"Visual instruction"—this, it cannot be too often reiterated, is the only valid kind, and for the most part the instructor must be the learner's own eye. Therefore we may think with satisfaction that, whatever else the teaching given in our museums may or may not effect, it can hardly fail to do good by laying in many cases a foundation for what has been called the "museum habit." To look at works of art only, so to say, by accident, to "find time" for them only in an occasional hour when nothing in particular beckons elsewhere, can profit no one much. We must take time for looking at them. We must make time to form a habit which will become, like reading books or going to concerts, a part of the routine of our lives. The difficulty of forming a new habit in busy adult years is a

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\* Paul M. Rea, Director of the Charleston Museum and Secretary of the American Association of Museums, in the Report of the Commissioner of Education for the year ended June 30, 1915.



strong argument for opening a museum freely to children whether they come for definite instruction or not. And to cultivate it, in children and in adults, the museum should do more than offer instruction, more than get fine things and arrange them well. It should make the looking at them as easy and attractive as possible.

This is not a concession to indifference or sloth. It is commonsense. Of course there must be good handbooks; but it is commonsense not to compel a visitor to turn to a handbook for information that can be given on a label—on such labels as the Metropolitan lavishly and intelligently supplies, to the astonishment, I am told, of some of its sister institutions. It would be commonsense to have in a great museum *large scale* plans, easily to be read and understood, indicating the location and the contents of the different rooms. And it is so clearly commonsense to have cloak rooms that it may seem impossible they should ever be lacking. Yet in at least one of our large museums there is no place where a coat or a parcel may be left, and in some others the allotted space is so small that, apparently, few but summer visitors are expected.

Once more, it is commonsense to have many seats and comfortable ones. It is as exhausting to be a “standee” for two or three hours in a gallery as in an opera house. To look and look again does not mean a succession of hasty glances but periods of restful contemplation such as most of our museums provide for in very few of their rooms. How often, even in the Metropolitan, so hospitable in other ways, do we think with longing of the comfortable chairs and sofas and ottomans in some of the great European galleries and in the rooms of our own art dealers! The dealers know their business. They know that they must not only permit us to see but tempt us to look, and to look long, and to come again. But one cold winter day when I had to spend hours in the well-warmed galleries of the Brooklyn Museum, wearing perforce a heavy fur coat, so encumbered by a muff and a bag that I could not use my note-book, and for miles (so I felt) in some directions finding rest only for the sole of my foot—that day I saw one of the reasons why more people do not form the museum habit.

Comfortable seats, we may be told, especially if they place us at good points of view, take up too much space in a museum, and they might attract people who merely want

to rest and lounge, not to look. But if the contents of the galleries are to be appreciated, to be *enjoyed*, the space should be given, and the cost should be borne even if it means a few works of art the less. If there is any risk of attracting idle wanderers we may well remember what M. Jusserand recently wrote of the way in which even the most famous lecture-rooms in the universities of France are open to all comers: "The man in the street may come in if he chooses, just to warm himself in winter or to avoid a shower in summer. Let him; perhaps he will listen too."

Really, the trouble in most of our American cities is that the people do not feel enough at home in their palaces of art. They enter them too much as though they were the palaces of kings, condescendingly opened for their timid inspection. Many are awed by the space, the silence, and what seems to them the grandeur of their unaccustomed surroundings. They do not need to be discouraged from staying too long. They need to be made to feel that they are very welcome, that the place exists for them. Many other people even among the professedly cultivated—the vogue of loan collections makes it plain—visit galleries of art as a certain kind of woman goes about among the shops, "just to see what they have got," and having superficially seen this, do not come again until the stock has been replenished with novelties. But in some of our public galleries it is largely the fault of the management that visitors do not more often buy with periods of quiet contemplation, and take away in their memories as their own possession for ever, the treasures of beauty that are displayed before them.

As for the "cherishing of gifted persons," it is of course highly important, for upon such persons we depend not only for the right conduct of our museums and the right guidance of the public but also for the art of the future. Often the museum will be the agency that reveals to some frequenter that he *is* a gifted person; but if he really is this—if he is born an artist or born with a strong love for art and keen and delicate powers of perception and appreciation—he will be able to direct his own development. For him the museum will scarcely need to do more than make itself as rich in the excellencies of art as it can. It is those who have vaguer desires, or even as yet no conscious desire at all for the ministrations of beauty, who chiefly need that the museum shall exert itself in their interest. Perhaps it is time now

to ask more definitely, What can it expect to do for them, to do for the people at large?

Not, of course, to turn them in quantities into accomplished amateurs of art! But it may hope to give some of them a love of art, of beauty, that will be a perennial fount of refreshment and true pleasure. And it may hope to prove to many that material things are not all in all; to widen their horizon and temper their devotion to the cult of "practical efficiency" by demonstrating that there are matters of genuine interest apart from the bread-earning routine and the money-grasping adventure; and to improve their taste so that they may wish for decency, order, and beauty in the conduct and the surroundings of their daily lives. If it is to do this in any widespread way, if, in Emerson's words, it is so to "open the sense of beauty" that "vulgar manners, tricks, bad eating, yelps, and all the miscreations of ugliness will become intolerable," it must strive for one main result which will be at the same time the root of further progress. It must convince the people that art, that beauty, is not a mere ornament of existence but a prime necessity of the eye and the soul, and that it need not be the personal possession of a few of the rich and leisured only but may be and should be a general possession, an integral part of the life of the community.

Here we find the answer to a question left unanswered on an earlier page: In our large museums of art should the lines be drawn to embrace "fine art" only? Evidently not. Indeed, when we think what art really meant to any really creative people, we must mourn that the term "fine art" has been incorporated in the name and that its implications have been respected in the policy of any large American museum. Evidently the public is right when it takes a special interest in a broadly inclusive collection of the work of a people like the Egyptians, who never made a useful object without striving to please the eye, and seem scarcely ever to have made a beautiful object which did not serve some definite purpose. To show the artistic products of each land and period as inclusively as possible, and with their aid to explain as clearly as possible the intimate interweaving of art with every phase of the life of the people that produced it, surely, in the America of today, which lacks the vivid object-lessons bequeathed by the past to older countries, this is the proper aim of a museum—not to set art

aside from life by trying to segregate its higher " purer " forms.

One way to emphasize the intimate connection that may and should exist between art and life is to show the affinities of the art with the history and the literature of any given period. Writing recently in the *Yale Review* of the study of Greek in our schools and colleges, Professor Goodell explained that while the study of the language has been falling off, interest in Greek art has greatly increased, so that " museums are now the chief agencies for cultivating a popular interest in old Greece." Should not their contents, he asks, incarnating the same spirit that speaks in the history and the literature of Greece, " claim a large place in the college? " Should not this possibility of high service, I may add, be remembered in collecting and displaying them? And must not any attempt to isolate certain classes of things, even though they be the highest, from their natural relationships in time and place, and to exhibit them simply as specimens of an abstract thing called " fine art," impair even their own æsthetic value?

Finally, let us be serious about all these matters but not too serious. Art, after all, is for the pleasuring of man's eye. It must begin with this if it is to do more by touching his imagination, by cultivating that thing called taste which has its spiritual as well as its physical side; and if it stops with the beginning, even so there is something gained. There is a great deal gained in the case of the many who, under our conditions of life, are almost wholly disinherited of harmless forms of enjoyment.

So different are our conditions from those of the great productive ages of art that we forget how large a part beauty then played in the life of the commonalty. We forget, for instance, how the beautiful or at least the picturesque prevailed in the streets of mediæval cities. We forget how entirely at home the people were in the churches which, in their furnishings if not in their fabric, were even more beautiful, much more beautiful, then than now. We forget that the great French cathedrals were municipal halls as well, the common meeting places of the people, and that in the nave of Old St. Paul's the Londoners did their trading and promenading, their servant hunting, even their gambling and flirting. And we forget the miracle-plays in the streets,

the frequent military, civic, and ecclesiastical pageants, the gay and diversified costumes of the people themselves. In dirt and squalor, in confusion and danger they often lived, and often under oppressive heels of power. But also, the poorest among them, they lived amid beauty, amid beauty that they themselves produced, beauty that they *owned*. Who shall say in how far it compensated them for whatever else they lacked?

Today we offer our urban populations one beautiful and beneficent thing that mediæval people did not have, the public park. But apart from this, what? Little excepting the museum of art. If they find pleasure there, even unaccompanied by such profit as we hope that many of them will also reap, surely the benefit will react upon us all; for to be starved for pleasure is as bad for a man as to be starved for bread and is even more provocative of evil thoughts and deeds.

So a first and foremost duty of a museum room is *not to look dreary*. Yet I remember some that do—some that are cold and colorless, inhospitable, even empty-looking although in fact they contain very beautiful and precious things. It is not enough to show such things. Each room as a whole, the museum as a whole, must at least be pleasing to the sight. If it can be sumptuous, a veritable expression of “the riches of art,” so much the better. And why should not a museum dedicated to plastic art be used to further other kinds of æsthetic enjoyment which will be beneficial in themselves and will attract people who might not otherwise seek its collections? What most surely and widely attracts our people today is music. Is there any good reason—that is, any unsurmountable reason—why at certain times music should not be provided for them in our art museums as it is in our parks, but of a higher quality than is there appropriate?

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